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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether there are common experiences which most people who become writers share. Samples of autobiographical writing assignments completed by about 120 graduate students (over 90% of whom already had some teaching experience) enrolled in masters programs in education and/or English were examined. Most of the narratives were structured in chronological order, and an overwhelming majority stress the importance of early childhood literacy experiences. No consistent pattern of success or failure, enthusiasm or alienation emerged from their first school experiences. Almost every single writer at least mentioned having engaged in some sort of private (or even secret) writing activity between the ages of 12 and 20. Many spoke at considerable length about the attraction of writing for themselves without the desire or possibility of communicating with any other reader during this period of their lives. Findings question the extent to which it is valid and helpful to place primary stress on "writing for communication" in courses and textbooks. What has given writers their greatest help in becoming writers may have been private, personal expression. (RS)

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Becoming a Writer: The Evidence from Teacher Autobiographies

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Introduction

As a teacher of Basic Writing at a comprehensive college and an active participant in collaborative projects with urban secondary schools, I often find myself overwhelmed by the evidence presented by those for whom learning to write has been a largely *unsuccessful* enterprise. Hearing so much testimony from people who hate and fear writing (or encounter that hate and fear in their own classrooms) tends to be contagious! So, partly as a hedge against this encroaching negativity, I got interested in studying people who, like myself, had enjoyed some success as writers.

I decided to focus my research on the graduate students in my "Teaching of Writing" course, although they might (and did!) deny that they were actually "writers." I thought that through examining samples of their autobiographical writing, and discussing their experience with them, I might be able to find at least a tentative answer to the questions, "Are there common experiences which most people who become writers share? If so, can we make these experiences accessible to all learners?"

Let me digress at this point and say a little about my sample of informants for this study. Since 1985, approximately 120 graduate students (enrolled in M. A. programs in Education and/or English) have taken my course in the "Teaching of Writing." Of this group, approximately 75% were female and 25% male. At least 90% of each class have been teachers already active in the classroom, most of them in primary or secondary schools, with a sprinkling of teachers on the post-secondary level and the occasional non-teacher. Most have been U. S. citizens and native English speakers, although there have been a few people from China, Africa, the Carribean and Europe.

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Approximately 90% of the sample have been second or third generation descendants of immigrants from Italy, Ireland and Eastern Europe.

Each semester that the course has been given, I required a ten-page "writer's autobiography" as the first assignment. As far as I am concerned, anyone who completes this assignment in a timely fashion has forfeited his or her right to deny being a writer! In fact, I have never had a student fail to complete the assignment, although there has been (of course) some grumbling from time to time, especially from some of the younger teachers who, like students in my freshman Basic Writing classes, insist that they have not lived long enough to fill up so many pages.

Pre-literary Experiences

Most of the narratives are structured in chronological order by the writers. Although a few people do ignore their pre-literacy experiences totally, the overwhelming majority stress the importance of early childhood experiences such as self-directed fantasy play, being read or told stories by a parent, grandparent or older sibling. Many, certainly a majority, vividly recall examples of fantasy play in which inner imagery and talking to oneself were essential ingredients. Curiously enough, the presentation of such self-directed activity is often introduced or framed by statements attesting to the importance of external, social influences in imaginative and linguistic development. Memory and "theory" seem to coexist uneasily.

What is perhaps most striking about the treatment of early childhood in these narratives is the frequent mention of exciting and fruitful encounters with technologies and equipment associated with writing and publication such as: pencils, pens and paper, typewriters, duplicating and printing equipment. Many people mentioned the thrill of sitting at mother's or father's desk playing at writing.

Primary Schooling

Some reported their first school experience as an idyllic period. For others, it was a time of trauma and terror. No consistent pattern of success or failure,

enthusiasm or alienation emerged. However, a large number of informants recalled early informal publication (on a bulletin board, say, or in a "book" created by a teacher) with pleasure. And several people mentioned the sense of exclusion and dismay which they felt when passed over for publication.

Adolescence

It was notable that *almost every single writer at least mentioned having engaged in some sort of private (or even secret) writing activity between the ages of 12 and 20.* Many spoke at considerable length about the attraction of writing for themselves without the desire or possibility of communicating with any other reader during this period of their lives. The following extracts are typical:

> I, like many people in their late teens, was filled with many emotions that I was trying to get a handle on...to make sense of what was going on inside of me. Every day, after school, I would travel to Manhattan and sit near the water...my pen and pad in hand, and just start writing whatever came to mind. It was a long, rambling narrative, written for no one else to see.

> With my limites spelling ability and limited writing ability I turned to my diary as a person would to a best friend and I would tell all.

> When I felt I couldn't talk to anyone I turned to writing. It was in my writing I created a world of understanding, compassion and sympathy that no other person could provide.

> In my teenage years...I wrote for "me." I used writing as an outlet.

As the extracts above suggest, poetry or journal writing by young women, and poetry and song lyric writing by young men figured extremely prominently in the narratives written by the teachers in my classes. Interestingly enough, the values and pleasures of these activities were generally contrasted with those of "school writing," which few found interesting, useful or pleasurable. For about half of the writers, private writing became a life-long occupation, unconnected to any other literary activity.

The prominence of private writing in the narratives was all the more striking because of the frequency with which the same authors stressed the importance of writing as a social activity. Many people remarked in one part of the paper that they never wrote anything except as a response to external demands or in order to receive praise from others, while noting elsewhere in the paper that they had often scribbled in a secret diary! In fact, they didn't seem to notice this contradiction until I pointed it out to them.

In some cases, perhaps as much as 25%, private writing during adolescence was complemented during this period by involvement in highly public literary activities such as school yearbooks, newspapers, literary magazines, etc. However, it should be noted that, in their comments, people often spoke as much about the technical aspects of printing and publication as about writing per se.

Adolescence also seemed to be the era in which most of the writers in my sample first felt themselves strongly affected by popular media such as comic books, films, rock music, etc.

Adulthood

For about 25% of the writers in my classes, teaching was actually a second career, the first having been in some sense marginally related to writing such as: stenography, advertising and media, publishing, printing, etc. Private writing had served many people as a means of self-therapy during a variety of crises.

Implications for Teaching

As far as I know, although previous discussions of how literacy develops have acknowledge the relevance of early informal publication to facility in writing, little attention has been given to the possible importance of exploring writing technologies in early childhood or private writing during adolescence and after. And as teachers we don't think much about providing such experiences for learners who don't discover them on their own. Perhaps we should.

Working as I do primarily with adolescents and post-adolescents, I am particularly interested in how I can provide my students with opportunities for private writing within the context of instruction. To what extent can I successfully and meaningfully "assign" an activity which, by its very nature, appears to be extra-curricular? I'm not sure that I have an answer to this question. However, the results of this study certainly confirm my sense that students' free writing in journals should not be shared or marked if it is to promote facility and confidence.

Above all, the study makes me question the extent to which it is valid and helpful to place primary stress on "writing for communication" in courses and textbooks. Is it perhaps possible that what has given *us* our greatest help in becoming writers has, instead, been private, personal expression? Such a conclusion would seem to be supported by the evidence from teacher autobiographies.